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ABSTRACT

Perceiving ethnic minority schools merely as institutions which provide competency in the language of heritage is a limited view. History, values, and cultural traditions are also within the curricula of most ethnic schools. The subject matter often conflicts with modern American values, which stress change and mobility rather than tradition. In order to cope with this conflict in values and to maintain their enrollments, ethnic schools must deal with the following issues: (1) positioning the school so that students' travel time is not too long; (2) competing with the busy activity schedules of students; (3) choosing a curriculum which will allow the next generation to survive in the midst of mainstream American culture; (4) setting tuition fees and dealing with meager budgets; (5) easing the culture shock and poor morale of ethnic teachers; (6) finding enough teachers; and (7) finding appropriate teaching materials. (VM)

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ISSUES IN ETHNIC MINORITY EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES

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ISSUES IN ETHNIC MINORITY EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES

Ethnic minority schools are often perceived as institutions in which the exclusive goal is to provide competency in the language of heritage among the children of immigrants or native Americans (e.g. Navajos, Penobscots, etc.). This is a very limited view of the objectives of ethnic schools established by such groups as Armenian Americans, Chinese Americans, Greek Americans, Native Americans and Jewish Americans. Although there is consensus about the role of language as a primary factor in the process and perpetuation of group identification,[1] most, if not all, ethnic schools also teach history, family and communal values, customs, holidays, literature, music, dance, craft forms unique to their traditional cultures, and sometimes religion. Thus, calligraphy to the Chinese Americans, shepherds and rug weavers to Armenian-Americans and Navajos, agrarian holidays to Jewish Americans whose lives in the first and second Jewish Commonwealth were intimately tied to agriculture, are all significant aspects of curriculum in their respective shools. Themes that stress respect for tradition, for the elderly, for the extended family, and concern for ethnic communal problems and activities, no matter how remote from the location of a particular population and its schools are conspicuous within the curricula of most ethnic schools.

How appropriate are these objectives in a society, which has become so non-agrarian that the small farmer has been driven off the land and to points of desperation and occasionally suicide,[2] which encourages change and mobility rather than tradition and structural stratification, in which families are at best nuclear, and often even the nucleus is fragmented, where the climate and topography are frequently in open conflict with calendar dates of ethnic planting and harvesting holidays, where the role models are industrial, technological and computer oriented, and where, in the case of groups with little current immigration and little hope for future influx from the motherland, even ethnic language competency is disappearing in the adult ethnic community.[3]

What do ethnic schools do in the face of these paradoxes? Are modifications of ethnic culture that will provide a better match

with the mainstream culture possible? How much and what types of adaptations are feasible without diluting or distorting the essence of each ethnic culture? Among outsiders looking in there may be mild, sometimes indifferent discussion of these matters, but among diverse sects and segments of each ethnic population, fiery arguments about these issues rage endlessly. One need only visit the schools and community centers of, for example, the political or religious subgroups among Jewish Americans, or Armenian Americans, or Native Americans to acquire a sense of the passionate seriousness with which this debate is pursued. Indeed, most participants in the debate feel that the position taken, and the manner in which the position is implemented in their schools, is a matter of life and death because their survival as an ethnic minority in the United States and elsewhere around the world depends in large measure on the effectiveness of their educational efforts.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF ETHNIC SCHOOLS

What are the characteristics of the schools that must either cope effectively with these issues or disappear? Children who attend ethnic schools do so in the late afternoon or on weekends supplementary to their elementary and high school studies in a public or private school. Ethnic day schools are an exception to this pattern. They hold classes during the school day and include both ethnic and general studies, the latter under the regulation of state departments of education. While teachers in the English or general studies department of day schools must be licensed and certified in most states, teachers who are members of the ethnic studies faculty in day schools and in supplementary schools only need competency in ethnic subjects and do not require state licensure.

Whereas in the past, many ethnic schools were also neighborhood schools, this pattern has become less prevalent since the growth of the suburbs that began after World War II.[4] Pupils commute by public transportation, by car pool, and by school bus up to one hour in each direction to week day ethnic schools and in some cases up to

two hours each way on weekends. In the case of supplementary schools which constitute the majority of all ethnic schools, demographic distribution affects both the quality and the quanity of ethnic education. Travel distance is often the prime determinant of how many times a week and how many hours a day classes may be scheduled. Public school schedules, extra-curricular activities parental income, availability, and commitment,and logistical transportation problems have resulted in a precipitious decline in the number of days per week and hours per day devoted to ethnic education. Only in day schools, where these issues are not as significant, have the extent and quality of ethnic education remained unaffected.

Ethnic groups tend to have a vast body of content and values that they wish to communicate and insufficient hours and years in which to transmit them. Most ethnic schools cannot successfully compete for the time of children beyond the age of 12 or 13. Athletic, social, occupational, and other cultural activities tend to be more important to most American junior high and high school students than an ethnic education is. Ethnic educators must consequently make important decisions about which content, ideals, and values they will cram into the four to six years in which they have educational contact with their youth, and how best to convey some of the material that under more propitious conditions would be more appropriate to adolescents and young adults.(5) Beyond all this, remains the troubling question about whether, no matter how well they choose what is to be taught and how well they teach it, there will be enough substance and quality provided to arm the next generation for survival within a mainstream culture that is basically indifferent rather than antagonistic to ethnicity. Past evidence of assimilatory processes and loss of group identification seem to suggest that in the struggle for ethnic survival, the indifference of the majority culture and its government is often a more formidable adversary than outright opposition and/or explicit attempts to extinguish ethnic identification.(6)

Supplementary schools, that have programs that run from six to ten hours a week and that have three to five sessions of two or more hours each, attempt to achieve significant levels of reading, writing, and language comprehension in addition to placing considerable emphasis upon history, literature, customs, the arts and in some cases religion. Those schools, with programs that total two to four hours a week, with no more than one to two sessions per week, tend to limit their language objectives severely, to provide some customs, music, and art, and to neglect, for lack of time, a substantive approach to history and literature.

Supplementary afternoon and weekend programs are supported in a variety of ways. Tuition tends to cover only a small fraction of costs because parents are often unable or unwilling to pay a great deal for ethnic education. Communal agencies, private benefactors, the church or synagogue, school fund raising functions, and in some cases the governments of the mother country of ethnic groups together provide the usually meager budgets with which most ethnic schools function.(7) State and federal government aid for day schools is extremely minimal (e.g. block grants of three to five dollars per child for some busing money within a town, core evaluations, A.F.C.D. lunches, Bilingual Education funds).

THE BACKGROUND OF ETHNIC TEACHERS

The pedagogical and academic background of ethnic teachers tends to be varied in quality. Those who are over forty-five and were educated in the United States may have attended an ethnic teacher training institution. However, fewer ethnic teacher training institutions exist today than in the past because of the increased attraction of general colleges and universities to youth from ethnic minority groups.(8) The growing trend toward study in out of town institutions has made even part-time participation in ethnic teacher training programs impossible. Ethnic schools that are unable to find well qualified teachers in all the subject areas of the curriculum are often forced to hire individuals whose primary qualifications are ethnic language ability. Sometimes the level of competency

even in this area is insufficient for qualitative language instruction.

Different types of difficulties may confront ethnic teachers who were born in the ethnic motherland, even though many hold degrees from teacher training institutions or from universities. Those who teach second and third generation American pupils of ethnic minority background frequently have difficulty understanding the interests and needs of this population even when the teachers are superbly trained from a substantive point of view.(9)

TEACHING MATERIALS

There is yet another facet to the problem of meeting learner needs in ethnic schools. Teaching materials (textbooks, workbooks, videotapes, pictures) that are used by a number of ethnic groups are in some cases produced by the government of the homeland country for use in overseas ethnic schools. It is not a simple matter even for well intentioned and skilled ethnic curriculum developers to strike an appropriate balance between inculcating a unique and discrete set of cultural values and providing materials and experiences relevant to learners who are surrounded by, and immersed in, a totally different set of cultural values and life patterns.

Ethnic teacher materials that are produced on the American scene are usually developed when a particular ethnic group is in a growth period, that is when there is either an influx of new immigrants or increased interest in ethnic education on the part of the resident ethnic population. However, as ethnic language competency has declined among older ethnic groups (e.g. those who reached American shores earlier and have not had large recent additions from the motherland) human and fiscal resources often become inadequate for the task of modifying teaching materals to meet the changing conditions. Consequently, materials that have grown inappropriate because they may be too difficult or irrelevant, or both, have negatively affected pupil interest and in some cases have resulted in increased attrition from ethnic schools.(10)

The quality of teaching materials is more critical in supplementary ethnic schools because their late afternoon and weekend class schedules often create enormous pupil stress and fatigue that are in themselves factors that produce attrition. These issues, although they impinge on day schools to some degree, are less significant for those settings, because traditional school schedules are observed. In spite of an academically challenging double language curriculum, the students are not burdened by attending two schools with different requirements and standards, often until six-thirty in the evening.(11)

TEACHER SUPPLY AND MORALE ISSUES

Most ethnic groups find that their youth show little interest in becoming ethnic teachers and administrators. The reason for this phenomenon is quite clear. Teaching positions tend to be part-time rather than full time, are poorly paid by comparison with the minimum full time salaries of public school teachers, and are generally devoid of professional benefits (e.g. in-service training, conferences, workshops, merit pay) and social benefits (e.g. pensions and health insurance).

Increasingly, therefore, ethnic teaching positions are filled either by able young people who do temporary part time teaching in ethnic schools while pursuing their long range professional goals through study, jobs, or apprenticeships in other fields, or by mothers who do not desire full time professional commitments and who are not dependent upon their teaching positions for economic survival. Some ethnic groups have their teaching ranks supplemented by new immigrants and/or students from the homeland country. Those groups who do not have this source available to them struggle to maintain their schools with a combination of some aging teachers who were born abroad and young teachers who drop out when they start their "real" careers. Many teachers, who begin teaching with a certain degree of idealism and commitment, grow disenchanted as they

observe the struggle to maintain ethnic schools in the face of an uncertain supply of teachers, limited time available to teach what needs to be taught, limited funds, and in some cases decreasing support and identification from the ethnic community.

ETHNIC EDUCATION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Ethnic schools that are well integrated with their cultural community in the United States seem to be more viable than those that are not. In the past this interrelatedness was taken for granted for a variety of reasons that included geographic density, huddling together for social or economic support in the face of the strangeness or indifference of the mainstream culture, and/or the constant influx of new immigrants from the ethnic motherland. Today, the ties between ethnic schools and the ethnic community are in many cases, more formal than natural, as members of some ethnic groups have moved to the middle class or have affiliated with other communal, social, political and educational frameworks which exert equal or stronger influence. Ethnic educators must design educational experiences that will foster a closer relationship between the children and the ethnic community's structures, activities and values. Preoccupation with the past and its traditions often lead ethnic educators to neglect the present and to ignore rich resources of community life that can be included in learning experiences which might help connect the present with the past. Varied and stimulating methods that maximize the effectivenss of activities and textual, visual, and auditory materials are needed. Ethnic teachers require interpersonal and group work skills as well as pedagogic strategies in order to attract and keep children in ethnic schools, despite the lure of other activities (many of which cause further assimilation into the mainstream culture) that compete for their interest and time.

In a society like the one in the United States that places a premium on change and youth, and that believes that the future is synonymous with progress, it is not an easy educational task to

communicate an appreciation for the past and its traditions. Ethnic educators need to devote time and thought to this critical issue because their survival may well depend upon it. Curricular materials that highlight the benefits of stability, security and of knowing who you are and what you belong to and believe in, need to be added to those that merely describe and applaud the past. Connections and analogies between personalities and events in the past, those in the present, and those within the personal experience of children need to be made by educators in ethnic schools. Some ethnic groups have fallen into the habit of highlighting themes about the persecution and the disasters that have befallen them. Primary identification in the role of victim is neither a healthy nor a sufficiently appropriate bond with which to tie children to their cultural group. Many groups have confronted this issue and have in recent years begun to develop written and visual materials that emphasize acts of heroism, support, and concern, unique contributions in the arts, philosophy, ethics, science and for very young children inspirational ethnic personalities.

Problems in the quality and impact of content delivery also abound. Dwindling ethnic language competency has resulted in a variety of serious problems for ethnic schools, and although a number of linguistic scholars do not accept the view that ethnic languages are in a terminal state in the United States, they are aware that they are facing serious difficulties [12]. Current conditions have forced educators to devote more time to basic language skills. As a consequence, most children, particularly in supplementary afternoon and weekend schools, never reach a level that provides them with ethnic literature that conveys heritage in cultural contexts. To deal with this problem, greater amounts of high interest simple vocabulary material analogous to that used in adult literary programs, needs to be designed. Such action will not, however, adequately convey the richness of ethnic literature during the limited number of years that children attend ethnic schools unless ethnic educators agree to provide the more complex material in translation. Resistance to this action, both because it undermines

the importance of ethnic language competency and because so much of the essence is lost in translation, has been endemic among ethnic educators.(13) But movement in this direction may be inevitable if the contextual fabric of a culture is to be bequeathed to future generations of ethnic minority populations, and not merely grammatical conjugations and a few memorized songs. Concretizing and increasing the relevance of abstract material that may be remote in time and place becomes ever more critical as the gap between the lives of young learners and those of first generation ethnics grows larger and larger. Materials that personalize cause and effect relationships, and concepts of time and space, as well as those that provide meaningful analogies for exotic or esoteric cultural phenomena or concepts are vital.

A number of the educational problems discussed in this paper stem from the fact, that as mentioned earlier, children attend ethnic schools for a minimal number of hours during four or five pre-adolescent years when powers of conceptualizaion are distinctly limited. Consequently, the development of informal, innovative institutional frameworks for continuing ethnic contact into the period of adolescence when more sophisticated levels of cognitive and ethical learning are achievable might buttress the work of ethnic schools considerably. Social and communal youth organizations, winter and summer camps, and culural groups of various types are frameworks that could attract adolescents and successfully compete for their time with already existing non-ethnic activities and institutions.

Ethnic educators may need to comprehensively review the extent to which role models and values should and/or can be modified, and the degree to which the groups' ethnicity can tolerate modification without distoring its core or unique essence. Contemporary events, issues and personalities that illustrate the dynam ic and pervasive quality of ethnic values, and aspirations should be emphasized and figure more prominently in the education offered in ethnic schools.

Data about the characteristics of ethnic teachers and the the conditions under which they work clearly indicate that unless circumstances are altered, it will be more and more difficult to attract anyone but temporary or unqualified individuals to this profession. In addition to improving and standardizing economic incentives, the instructional competencies of ethnic teachers can be raised by providing foreign born teachers with required course work about the psychological and cultural aspects of American society. In view of the focal role played by language of heritage in ethnic schools, screening measures that include advanced level language competency criteria need to be used in the hiring process, whenever possible. Finally, efforts to reverse the decline in ethnic language competency should be initiated through the vehicle of adult education, particularly in those communities in which the source of ethnic speakers from abroad has disappeared.

The problems and issues described above may be perceived as specific to the individual groups facing them, and for them to solve. On the other hand, they may be examined within the context of a larger question, namely with what cultural configuration or model do Americans wish the United States to identify. Various theories about the relationship between subcultures and the mainstream culture have surfaced during America's more than two hundred year history. Protagonists and antagonists have argued the merits and weaknesses of the melting pot theory (accelerating the pace with which minority cultures blend into and disappear within the mainstream culture), and the mosaic theory (preserving cultural differences as separate colors in a mosaic window are preserved). It seems clear that, if the United States wishes to remain a multicultural society beyond the first or second transitional generation of immigrants, ethnics and non-ethnics alike, must give serious attention to the substance, structure, and support systems for ethnic education.

FOOTNOTES

Page

(1) 1. Lehrer, Leibush
"The Role of Yiddish in the Jewish School" Why Yiddish For Our Children New York: Sholem Aleichem Folk Institute 1956.

(1) 2. The New York Times and Boston Globe has published many news stories on this issue in the last year. For example, see article in the Boston Globe, December 15, 1985 pp. 12 & 13 titled "Farm Belt Woes End in Tragedy".

(1) 3. Yiddish, Swedish and German speaking groups have little or no influx. Some Asian groups have experienced an increase of ethnic speakers from abroad recently.

(2) 4. Chinese, Jewish, Armenian, Greek and Portuguese day and supplementary schools among others have been affected by this phenomenon.

(3) 5. The literature and the classical sources of many ethnic groups require a level of mastery in language, history, and philosophy, and a maturity that are beyond the scope of the average pre-adolescent pupil.

(3) 6. For information on this topic see Glazer, N and Moynihan D., Beyond the Melting Pot, Cambridge, MA. M.I.T. Press, 1970, and Gordon, M., Assimilation in American Life, The Role of Race, Religion and National Origins, New York, Oxford University Press, 1964.

(4) 7. Greek, Chinese and Armenian schools receive support from abroad. This support may be in the form of curriculum materials, in-service teacher training in the home country specifically geared to the needs of teachers teaching in ethnic schools throughout the world, and/or outright financial grants.

(4) 8. In the Boston area, for example, the Greek Hellenic College terminated its teacher training program in recent years and the Hebrew Teacher's College changed its name to the Hebrew College.

(5) 9. A principal of an Armenian day school and a principal of a Yiddish supplementary school indicated that their foreign born teachers had problems in this area.

(5) 10. A beginners' language text used in 1960 YiddisheKinder, although revised twice, is much too difficult for current language levels of pupils.

(6) 11. In Montreal, Canada quadralingual programs that provide instruction in French, English, Hebrew and Yiddish existed. The author visited one of these day schools in 1972 an found the learning environment facilitative and non-pressuring.

FOOTNOTES (continued)

Page

(8) 12. See Grosjean, F., Life With Two Languages, Cambridge, MA. Harvard University Press, 1982 and Fishman, J., The Lively Life of a "Dead" Language or "Everyone Knows That Yiddish Died Long Ago."

(9) 13. Shulman, E. "Tzvai Shprochikait in America Un Die Meglechkaiten Far Yiddish" ("Bilingualism in America and the Possibilities for Yiddish") Kulture Un Dertziyung, New York, Workmen CIrcle, No. 1. (January, 1967).